

Fort Smith goes to the movies: *True Grit*



Fort Smith in fact and fiction

Since the late 1800s, the characters who played out their lives in Fort Smith and the Indian Territory have inspired many books and novels. In the 20th century, American cinema have also found them a goldmine for imaginative stories of harrowing adventure. Hollywood’s vision of this region is gripping - but the real story of what happened here is just as fascinating!

Background

Beginning in the 1950s with the publication of a series of fiction and non fiction accounts of the federal court in Fort Smith and its famous judge, public awareness of the legacy of Fort Smith was on the rise.

The site of the federal court was restored and opened to the public in 1957. In 1961, Fort Smith National Historic Site was added to the National Park system to commemorate both the military and legal history of the site.

Previous books about Judge Parker and the federal court focused primarily on factual retellings of the history of the court. The captivating stories of the people who worked for the court, such as deputy marshals, had yet to be told.

Arkansas native Charles Portis filled in this gap with his novel, True Grit. First published as a serialized story in the *Saturday Evening Post*, in 1868, it was released as a book shortly thereafter. The book gained quick popularity, and work was soon underway to tell the story in movie form.

Rooster Cogburn



Perhaps the most famous character in True Grit is Deputy U.S. Marshal Reuben J. “Rooster” Cogburn. Created by author Charles Portis, Rooster Cogburn does not represent an actual deputy but is instead an amalgamation of the real men who served the federal court in Fort Smith. Portis intended the character to be “a representative figure of those hardy deputy marshals who worked for Judge Parker’s court.”

As planning for a film of the story began, veteran

western actor John Wayne was seen as the obvious choice to play the character of Cogburn. While described as having both an eyepatch and a moustache in the novel, John Wayne wore only the eyepatch in his portrayal of “Rooster” Cogburn. In his even-handed and engaging portrayal of Deputy Marshal “Rooster” Cogburn, John Wayne finally earned his first academy award for best actor in 1970. The image of John Wayne as “Rooster” Cogburn remains one of the most prominent depictions of frontier lawmen today.

Fact & Fiction

A fictional account of the federal court set in the late 1870s, True Grit was first serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* and almost immediately developed into a film, released July 3, 1969. The film had an immediate effect on the park, boosting visitation that month to over 10,000.

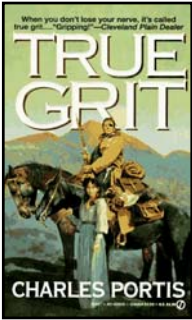
The film’s depiction of Fort Smith executions closely follows the novel, but is not as blatantly graphic as that of *Hang ‘Em High*. The executions as presented in *True Grit* include both accurate statements and mythological depictions. The book points out that most executions were conducted privately. But the film shows vendors selling goods and wares to the crowd and also perpetuates the

myth that “Judge Isaac Parker watched all his hangings from an upper window in the courthouse.”

Deputy Marshal Cogburn is also referred to as a ‘Marshal’ throughout the film. The U.S. Marshal oversaw operations at the court; deputy marshals, such as Cogburn, did the field work of serving warrants.

While author Charles Portis argued that the film should be made in the Arkansas and Oklahoma area where the story is set, the films producers chose to film in the Uncompahgre National Forest near Montrose, Colorado.

An interview with Charles Portis



In the summer of 2000, Charles Portis, the author of *True Grit* corresponded with park staff regarding the background of his novel and the famous film based on it. Below are excerpts of his comments:

What was your inspiration for the story?

“I was reading some frontier memoirs at the time.... I liked the form and tone – a first-person narrative, simple, direct and innocent. So, I thought I would try my hand at a fictional version. I settled on a revenge plot, common enough in such accounts.”

Using a woman as the main character in a Western was unusual at the time *True Grit* was written. Tell us more about the character of Mattie Ross.

“An old lady is telling the story. She relates these rather squalid events in what she takes to be a proper, formal way. And she shows herself, unconsciously, perhaps, to be just as hard in her own way as these hard customers she disapproves of, and has to deal with. For some reason I just liked the idea of having a starchy old lady as a narrator.”

Are any of the events in the novel based on actual incidents?

“Yes, I did take the snake pit episode from an actual event. Some other things too, from written accounts... “

What type of research did you do for your story?

“As for my research methods, they were alternately intense and slapdash. I did read newspaper accounts of the trials on microfilm from the Fort Smith *Elevator* and other papers. I read whatever books and pamphlets came my way, and I did walk the ground where the events in the story take place. If I couldn’t confirm something, or locate a fact I needed, I would just make something up. Still, you like to get things right.”

How did you feel about the screen adaptation of your novel?

“The screenplay stayed pretty close to the book. I noticed that the movie director, Henry Hathaway, used the book itself, with the pages much underlined, when he was setting up the scenes. I also noticed that some of the actors had trouble speaking the intentionally stiff dialogue. I didn’t write the screenplay. It was sent to me and I made a few changes, not many. I did write the last scene, in the graveyard, which didn’t appear in the book.”

What can you tell us about the choice of locations for the filming of the movie?

“Hal Wallis, the producer, had considered making the movie in Arkansas, and sent an advance man here. I drove this man around northwest Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma. He did like the town of Van Buren, saying it would do nicely for 1870s Fort Smith. Later, Hal Wallis called to tell me that there were logistical problems with shooting the picture in Arkansas. I have the idea that Hathaway (the director) persuaded Wallis to make it in Colorado.”

What impressions do you have of John Wayne from the film?

“Wayne was a bigger man than I expected. He was actually bigger than his image on screen, both in stature and presence. One icy morning, very early, before sunrise, we were all having breakfast in a motel.... A tourist came over to speak. Wayne rose to greet her. He stood there, not fidgeting and just hearing her out, but actively listening, and chatting with her in an easy way, as his fried eggs congealed on the plate. I took this to be no more than his nature. A gentleman at four o’clock on a cold morning is indeed a gentleman.”

Questions to Consider

This film, like all movies, is intended primarily as entertainment. However, as a historical drama, the film contains a great number of messages and misconceptions about the past. When watching *True Grit*, use the following questions to think futher about the movie and its message:

- Promotional material for the film called *Tue Grit* a “Brand New Brand of American Frontier Story.” How does the film differ from the traditional western story?
- How does the film stereotype “Frontier Justice?”
- While set in Arkansas and Indian Territory, the movie was filmed in the State of Colorado. What effect does this geographical change have on the film?
- In depicting executions at Fort Smith, what kind of statement does the film make about capital punishment?
- How does this film characterize Judge Parker? Is he seen as a sympathetic and fair character?
- The ending of the film and the novel it is based on differ slightly. Which ending do you think is more effective?

Sources/ For Further Reading

If the film *True Grit* interests you, here are more sources you can use to explore the history and themes behind the movie:

Portis, Charles. *True Grit: a Novel*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.

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